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Americans Increasingly See College as Essential and Worry More About Access, Poll Finds

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The proportion of Americans who view a higher education as being necessary to succeed economically has risen sharply this decade, but the percentage who believe that the vast majority of people who are qualified for college have the opportunity to go has dwindled over the same period, according to survey findings scheduled for release today.

Among the 1,009 adults who participated in the nationwide survey—conducted by Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, two independent nonprofit research groups—55 percent said college is necessary, up from 31 percent of those who responded to the same question in 2000. But only 29 percent of respondents to the most-recent poll said qualified students have the opportunity to go to college, down from 45 percent in 2000.

The proportion of respondents who said access to higher education for qualified students is a problem—67 percent—was the highest in the 15-year history of the survey of public attitudes about higher education. This is the sixth time the poll has been conducted.

"American public attitudes seem to be on a virtual collision course," says this year's report, "Squeeze Play 2009: The Public's Views on College Costs Today." (The report will be available on the Web sites of [Public Agenda](#) and the [public-policy center](#) today.)

"At a moment when college is more frequently perceived as absolutely essential," it says, "more Americans think that a college education is out of reach for many."

The findings of the report are based on telephone interviews that were conducted in late December. The previous survey was conducted in early 2007 ([The Chronicle](#), May 31, 2007), when the nation's economy was relatively strong, and the report's authors said they wanted to probe changes in attitudes since fiscal conditions have worsened.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Americans voiced more concern about the availability of student financial aid in the most-recent survey than they did in 2007 and were more likely in the latest poll to say that students have to borrow too much money for college.

About four in 10 respondents to the most-recent survey disagreed with the statement that almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get the loans or aid they need. That was up from about three in 10 who said the same thing 18 months earlier, in the 2007 survey.

At the same time, 86 percent of respondents to the latest poll said students have to borrow too much money to pay for college. That compares with 78 percent in 2007.

There were also some changes in Americans' views about what colleges care about most. A slightly higher proportion of respondents to the latest survey—55 percent, versus 52 percent in 2007—said they thought colleges are like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line. A smaller percentage of survey participants in the most-recent poll—35 percent, versus 43 percent in 2007—said colleges mainly care about making sure students have a good educational experience.

However, the proportion of Americans who said colleges could spend less and still maintain a high quality of education fell, from 56 percent in 2007 to 53 percent in the latest poll.